

JUTLAND MEMOIR May 31

The Battle of Jutland, May 31, 1916, was the major naval battle of World War I (1914-1918); at Jutland, Great Britain fought the Germans to a strategic draw. The British, in part because of the newness of SIGINT, missed an opportunity to destroy the German fleet once and for all, although, as a result of its performance in the battle, the German Fleet basically sat out the rest of the war. Among the faulty analysis performed was a misunderstanding of German high command call sign usage.



Part of the British fleet at the start of the war.

Part of the problem was communicating the signals intelligence, a problem not unique to this battle, and, fortunately, one corrected thereafter. During WWI, signaling methods at sea were a mixture of flag, semaphore, and Morse Code, sent by both wireless telegraphy and searchlight. Communications between ships spread out in formation over a wide area was difficult during battle, and each form of signaling had its disadvantages. These drawbacks led to ineffective communications, and to widespread confusion in passing orders and intelligence.

What were some of these disadvantages? Wireless telegraphy, what we now call radio, was relatively new and was dependent upon electrical supply and aerials, both of which were vulnerable in wartime. Even if the strength of a signal was strong, it still risked being jammed by the Germans, who became quite adept at it. Finally, wireless telegraphy was a slow process, involving several steps. For example, an order would be coded by the signal officer and sent to the wireless

telegraphy office. There, it would be decoded and sent right back to the signal officer in plaintext to ensure that it actually matched the original text. Then the order would be finally sent out.

Flags and semaphore, being purely visual forms of communication, were vulnerable to weather, smoke, and shelling. Moreover, ships had to sail relatively close to each other to actually read the signals. The flagship therefore was often placed in the middle of the battle line so that it could send out these signals, but if the battle line was long, as it was during the Battle of Jutland, a signal could take half an hour for all ships to receive it. Visual communications, therefore, were slow and could be missed or easily misread.

What about searchlights? They had the advantage of being seen at night or during times of poor visibility. Also, as was the case with wireless telegraphy, they required electricity. But there was one other vulnerability often missed. Charles Thomas Sewell was a leading signalman on the light cruiser, HMS *Southampton* during the Battle of Jutland. The following was taken from his memoirs:

“It was noted that at the end of the night action when the searchlights went out, a great number of direct hits were recorded. This was accounted for by the fact that the red glow of the carbons of a searchlight would be a better target for a gunlayer through a telescope than the dazzle of the searchlights when switched on. This of course was remedied in the production of searchlights later by fitting a prismatic shutter like the shutter of a camera.”

Source: *The Signalman* by Debbie Lyddon. Her grandfather provided his memoirs from the battle. *The Signalman* is part of the Languages of the First World War Project*; background on Battle of Jutland comes from CCH materials.

*(U): As the name suggests, The Languages of World War One project focuses on the effect the war had on language, e.g., slang invention, vocabulary manipulation.